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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000217

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SUBJECT: IRAQI REACTION TO PRESIDENT BUSH'S SPEECH

(U) Classified by Deputy Political Counselor Charles O. Blaha, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Iraqi reaction to President Bush's January 10 Iraq policy speech has been mixed, tending to be mostly but not completely favorable among Embassy contacts, consistently critical among Sadrist and hardline Sunnis. Most Iraqis across the spectrum hope the U.S. troop surge will bring an end to Baghdad violence. Some Iraqis have expressed doubts about Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) ability to help secure Baghdad. End Summary.

Ambassador's Listens to Iraqi Opinionmakers

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¶2. (C) On the afternoon of January 11, the Ambassador invited opinionmakers from across Iraq's political spectrum to discuss the President's speech and policy for Iraq. Participants included Mithal Alusi, an independent member of the Council of Representative (COR), Falah Fayadh, a Dawa COR member, Mrs. Obeidi, Iraqiyya COR member, Hamid Majid Moussa, Iraqqiya COR member, Nada Soudani, SCIRI COR member, Hassan Al-Shammari, Fadhila COR member, Sadiq Rikabi and Ahmed Saadawi, Dawa staff of the Prime Minister's office, Ali Dabbagh, Prime Minister's spokesman, and Saadi Barzinji, KDP COR member. (Note: the Sunni COR member who had RSVP'd could not attend due to problems at a checkpoint.)

¶3. (C) The Ambassador highlighted the key components of the new plan. The Ambassador noted that there seemed to be general agreement on the need to secure Baghdad and that commanders had agreed on the number of troops needed. But advancing political reconciliation was not so clear. What, he asked, could the U.S. do to encourage Iraqi political factions to reconcile? What more could be done to enlist the support of Iraq's neighbors?

¶4. (C) Overall, the Iraqi guests appreciated the President's effort to get Iraq "right." More than one participant noted positively that the President had admitted that past mistakes had been made and wanted to learn from past actions.

-- Falah Fayadh was the only guest who specifically questioned the need for an increase in U.S. forces. He said that the focus should be on strengthening Iraqi forces and that after security improved, then tackle both political problems and the neighbors.

-- Ali Dabbagh stressed that the U.S. should concentrate on engaging the Arab world. He also noted that support for Iraq's housing program and the PRTs would be elements of creating jobs and economic growth.

-- Hamid Majid Moussa said that the timing of the new strategy was good. Iraqi society had been shaken and it was time to tie social, political, security, and economic measures together. Although political success was primarily

in Iraqi hands, he said that the U.S. should make sure that all parties understood the U.S. firm position on Iraq, since many held the illusion that the U.S. position was different than it is. (Comment: We believe he referred to persistent conspiracy theories that the U.S. would be willing to replace the elected government with a new "national front.")

-- Mithal Alusi observed that there was a "cold war" in the region between forces of moderation and extremism. He said that Iraqis and many in the region were facing the same threat from the "takfiris" and should be working together. He criticized the current GOI efforts to deal with the neighbors. He hoped the US could build a regional alliance against terrorist threats.

-- Hassan Al-Shammeri stated that Iraqi problems were political rather than security, both locally and regionally. Locally, parties did not respect the rule of law and placed their particular interests above national interests.

-- Alia Obeidi said she believed the political effort had to be at least equal to the military effort and thought that the answer to militias was more diplomatic than military. Iraqis too had to learn from past mistakes, mentioning de-Ba'athification -- although she acknowledged that there was no clear steps forward on the issue now. The former security agencies had truly been a thorn in Iraqi society, but yet some fair solution needed to be found if not for them, then for their families.

-- Nada Soudani felt that the government had not been given sufficient authority to manage the security problems. Even if they made mistakes and were not 100% successful, they should be given the authority. She complained that the Iraqi

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forces did not have the military capabilities of the American forces and hoped that the increase in U.S. troops would be used to strengthen Iraqi forces.

Council of Representatives

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15. (U) In Iraq's Council of Representatives (CoR), which failed to reach quorum January 11, the planned U.S. troop increase was the fourth item discussed (International Zone access badges for CoR members was first). Shiite Dawa Tanzim bloc leader Abdulkarim al-Anzi argued that Iraq is a sovereign country and the CoR therefore should have approved the surge. Sunni Speaker Mashadani replied there was no support for this idea, because Iraq was in a serious situation. Independent secular Mithal al-Alusi added that the USG had consulted with Iraqi leaders and bloc leaders about its plans, which he supported.

Consistent Criticism from Sadrists and Hardline Sunnis

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16. (U) The most consistent criticism of the President's speech has come from Sadrists politicians, who oppose any U.S. troop presence, and hardline Sunnis. The spokesman for the hardline Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars said the speech "played on the U.S. public's fear of terrorism," and Sunni Iraqi National Dialogue Front head Salih Mutlaq called the strategy "new, yet old."

Local Reaction

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17. (C) Local Baghdad reaction was mixed. Sunni and Shia local government officials reacted favorably to the speech, and said Baghdad residents are hopeful it will succeed, but two officials called the new strategy a "last chance" for President Bush and PM Maliki. Others in Baghdad were more pessimistic. Sunni leaders were pleased by the President's warnings to Iran and Syria. The Baghdad governor worried

that Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) command structure was not up to the task.

¶18. (C) In the heavily-Shiite southern city of Basrah, Iraq's second-largest city, interest in the President's speech was high, and much attention was focused on the need to disband militias. Governor Mohammed al-Wa'eli, who got up at 5:00 am to watch the speech live, told PRT officials the speech had many positive points, and said the troop increase should have happened long ago. Two local media representatives, however, viewed the speech as U.S. support for Sunnis.

¶19. (C) In Shiite Najaf, Governor Assad al-Taee, Provincial Council (PC) Chair Abdul Hussein al-Mowsawi and human rights lawyer Ali al-Ghurab all characterized the speech as a demonstration of President Bush's support for the GOI. Al-Taee noted the warnings to Iran and Syria. However, both al-Mowsawi and al-Ghurab believe the speech also demonstrated that decreased domestic support for the President.

¶10. (C) In tribal Shiite Dhi Qar, many people supported the focus on Baghdad security, but worried that a potential Baghdad confrontation with the Mahdi Army militia (JAM) would spill over into Dhi Kar. They welcomed increased focus on reconstruction, but some local residents expressed doubts about the ISF's ability to control violence.

¶11. (C) In the mixed province of Babil, PRT contacts generally viewed the speech positively regardless of political leaning, focusing on the U.S. surge instead of the ISF role or the proposed U.S. economic assistance to Iraq.

¶12. (C) In heavily-Sunni Salah ad Din, Governor Hamad Hamoud and Deputy Governor Abdullah Ajbarah agreed on the need for improved Baghdad security, and welcomed the President's comments about the need for provincial elections and de-Ba'athification reform. The Deputy Governor noted (incorrectly) that the President mentioned "Sunni insurgents" but made no mention of militias (which Sunnis claim are a Shiite phenomenon). The Governor doubted the Maliki government adequate command of the ISF.

¶13. (C) In the Kurdistan region, news of the speech was overshadowed by the January 11 MNF-I operation in Erbil that resulted in the arrest of five suspected Iranian Qods Force members. Kurdish KDP bloc leader Saadi Barzinji said that although he had not read the speech closely, he was generally pleased with it.

KHALILZAD